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Basics for Schools

"Let's make every day
an open house"

Thomas L. Wells
Minister of Education, Ontario



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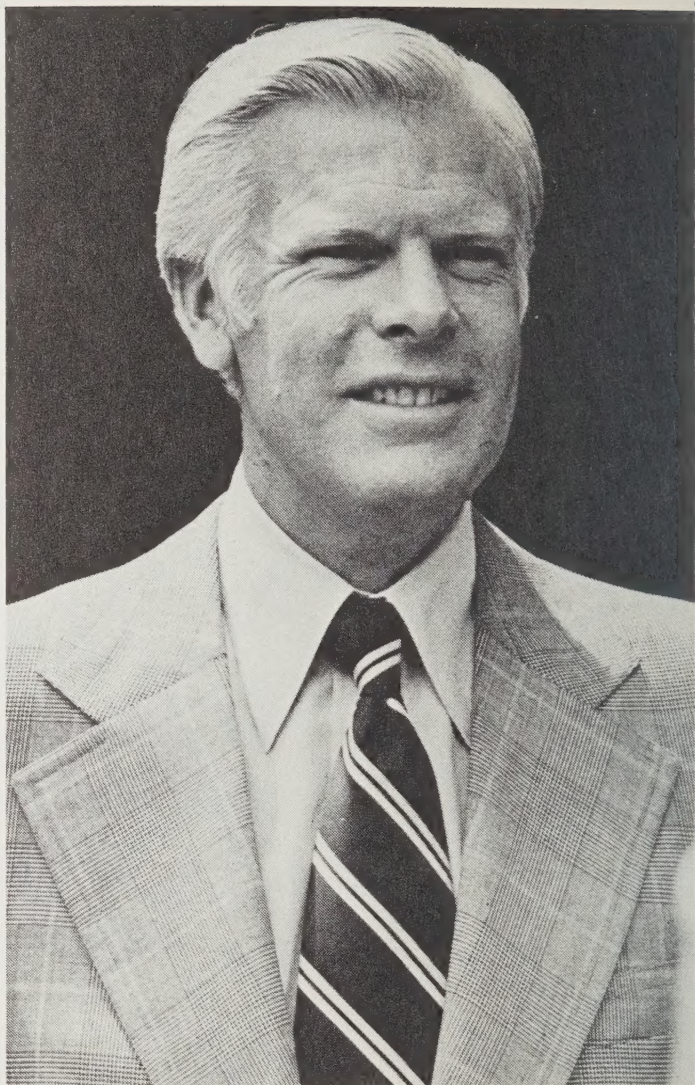
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"Let's make
every day
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ONTARIO'S EDUCATION MINISTER
THOMAS WELLS

Opinion

★ *These remarks are extracts from two speeches made recently by Ontario's Education Minister Thomas Wells.*

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By THOMAS WELLS

Of the many charges levelled by critics at the schools today, few have been more prevalent or more difficult to refute than the allegation that "the basics" are being neglected, especially in the elementary schools.

I do not want to get into a philosophic debate as to what "the basics" really are. So that we can stand on roughly the same ground, let me just say that "the basics" go well beyond the traditional 3 Rs.

When parents and others talk about the basics, they are usually referring mainly to the 3Rs—reading, writing and arithmetic. But the basics obviously do not stop there, and any public debate should be conducted in the context of a broader interpretation of the basics than simply the 3Rs.

I believe that the basics—however one tries to describe them—can be subdivided into four essential components (even though they actually constitute an indivisible whole):

The fundamental premise is that education must develop and preserve the confidence and self-worth of the individual child.

Limit of potential

From that foundation, one can move on to say that each child, to the limit of his or her potential, should:

Become proficient in the skills fundamental to future learning;

Acquire knowledge and attitudes leading to active participation in Canadian and world society;

Acquire the moral and esthetic sensitivity necessary for a complete and responsible life.

In any event, in raising the question of public concern about basics, I am suggesting that the elementary school curriculum is facing a sort of credibility problem in the eyes of many people.

This is very serious business—and I don't mean politically, I mean educationally.

When groups as diverse as the Ontario Home and School Association and the Ontario Chamber of Commerce come to the minister of education and the government asking that something be done to re-emphasize the teaching of the basics, then something is wrong somewhere.

The parent who is concerned or worried about his child or the school system at large is often confused and frustrated before he can come to grips with any significant issues.

This kind of frustration, if it is widespread—and I believe it is widespread, right across North America—can build up and build up, to the point that public pressure may dictate eventual changes which in the long run could be detrimental to pupils.

No curriculum, no program—no school or education system—will stand the test of time if it is not supported by parents and the public, as well as by educators.

Nagging worries

This is the challenge we face right now. While parents willingly place their children in the hands of the school and the teacher, with a basic peace of mind that the school is doing a good job, there are nagging worries in some quarters that perhaps the schools are straying a little too far off course.

Today the public is being bombarded with confusing and bewildering information in the mass media about the health of our schools. Editorial writers pontificate on the need to return to the basics. There are letters to the editor from increasing numbers of distraught parents. University professors say that some of their students never learned to read or write.

And it's not just the basics. Tied in with all of this are parental worries about other things—like a perceived lack of discipline and open-plan schools which they often equate with a lack of order and structure and direction, and the whole business of assessing student achievement and progress.

All of these things, taken together, add up to a climate where people begin to have serious concerns that perhaps there may be something to all of the public hand-wringing about the schools.

A major concern of parents—which is expressed to me time and time again—is that they seldom feel completely at home in their children's school.

In some schools, even when they visit on Parents' Night, they have the feeling that the gates have been opened for that evening only, and that they may, if things work out, be able to get back in the Spring.



Parents ask why they can't find out more about what and how their children are being taught. They are disappointed if they cannot get anything more than abstract generalizations about the school's educational program.

They are disappointed and frustrated if they can't really get a handle on how well their child is doing in various subjects, and the level of the child's achievement.

This is the credibility of our school system I am talking about. In a society where parents are being increasingly confronted with claims that educational standards are deteriorating, anything less than a relaxed open-door policy and open communication at the neighborhood school is asking for trouble.

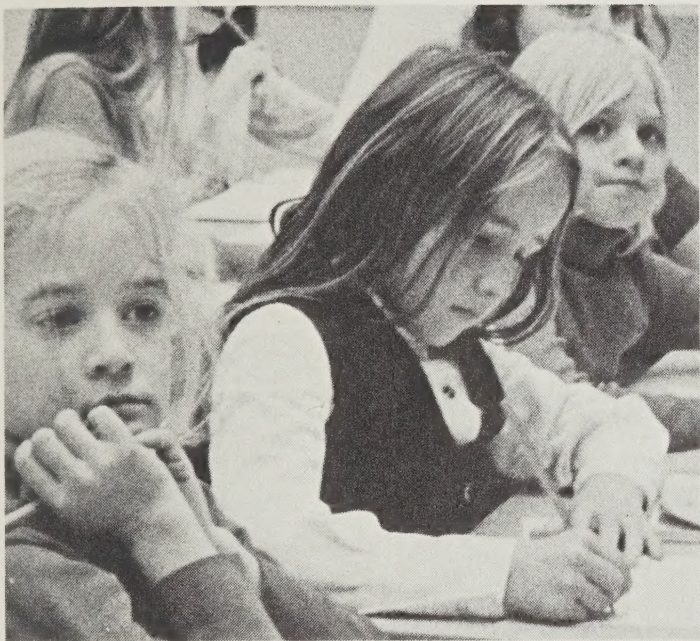
If parents are blockaded at the school door or at the classroom door—either literally or figuratively—we create or accentuate a situation which adds strength and a seeming credibility to concerns about deterioration in education quality.

Research and philosophic soul-searching we do not need on this challenge. Action—and now—we need.

The order of the day is common sense—sound practical judgment exercised by people of normal intelligence.

Let us first take a hard look at every classroom that falls within our responsibility or jurisdiction. Neither we nor the children we serve—let alone the parents—can afford any classroom where the essential skills are not receiving adequate stress and emphasis.

The word “inspector” may have drifted outside the normal education jargon these days. But everyone with supervisory responsibility, from principals on up, carries the responsibility of classroom monitoring and evaluation.



Let us get parents into the neighborhood school and show them what's being done for their children. Let's make every day open-house within reason.

Let's get more volunteer aid programs going, and get parents working in the formal education setting.

Let's work to establish meaningful—and I stress meaningful—community-school committees where parents and teachers can work and talk as allies rather than strangers or protagonists at arms-length.

Let's set up practical in-service workshops—with parents—so teachers and principals can learn to talk more confidently, openly and candidly with parents.

We must convince school boards first, and then principals and teachers, that the evaluation and reporting of pupil progress must not be mechanical or impersonal.

Parents are becoming very restless and dissatisfied about methods of evaluation and measurement that lack substance. Surely it is not too much for parents to ask for evaluation and reporting that has some real substance to it.

Superficial checklists or abstract cliches on report cards—let alone dehumanized computer printouts—are not enough. Efficiency is one thing, but let us remember that we are in the people business—what's more, the young people business.



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